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ALFRED MC COY

LEE LEONARD: There are in this world many people who believe that drug addiction is perhaps the major source of crime in our country, certainly, and here, in New York, I think more and more people are following that belief. The addicts in New York are said to steal about a half a billion dollars annually to maintain their habits.

Well, I mention this because our next guest has investigated the role that he believes the United States government is playing in allowing this heroin to flood into the United States and, in many cases, most of it, right into New York. So please welcome the co-author of THE POLITICS OF HEROIN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, Alfred McCoy.

[APPLAUSE]

Alfred, right out front, that most private of governmental agencies, the C.I.A. is mentioned in your book early and often, and I understand that they even requested to read the book before it was published. The question is how did they find out about it?

ALFRED MC COY: They didn't -- well, I don't know exactly what point they found out about it; the time that they made their overture was June first, the day before I testified in front of the Senate on my findings so I assume that they you know heard about it from people on the Hill.

I was surprised that it took them that long to find out about it because I'd been interviewing their own agents for about a year and a half before that time. So I guess, they not only can be condemned for their involvement in their drug traffic, they're perhaps inefficient as well.

LEONARD: Well, having read the book, did they exert any pressure on Harper & Row not to publish or to make changes? Is this the book that you wrote or were changes made?

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MC COY: No, there were absolutely no changes made whatsoever. In the beginning when they first of all sent a very high ranking agent around to Harper & Row to request a copy of the manuscript, and the kind of overtures they were making and in their private correspondence to Harper & Row, the kind of statements they were making were quite militant, quite strident, at one point, they said, sort of, if you decide to publish the book, in the course of their correspondence.

They thought at one point that they had a fairly good chance of presenting enough evidence and applying enough pressure on Harper & Row to get them to withdraw the book from publication. And I think the thing that made the difference was in the course of these negotiations I decided that really that the thing should be aired publicly, so I just went and talked to some people in the media and the media, NBC, THE NEW YORK TIMES, THE WASHINGTON POST reacted very, very strongly against the CIA's behavior in this case. There were some fairly strong editorials, there were some very very good articles that appeared in the TIMES, and, as a result of it all, the CIA kind of backed down.

LEONARD: Now, when you imply that the government and the CIA is a governmental agency and in your book other areas of the government are involved in this drug traffic, one has to ask, why? The President of the United States, Mr. Nixon has declared a war on drugs in this country. Certainly local and state as well as federal authorities are involved in a fight against it. What, in what areas of the government would it be to our advantage to encourage drug traffic and why?

[OVERTALK]

... personal gain on the basis of individuals?

MC COY: First of all, (UNCLEAR) ... what it is, is simply tolerating and living with it. The United States government's complicity in the traffic really kind of takes place on three levels.

The first is forming and I guess as a general statement you have to distinguish between what goes on in Europe and what goes on in southeast Asia.

In Europe, the United States government has been very, very successful in curbing the traffic, in the middle east as well; they made enormous gain, and I think the record is a good one.

However, in southeast Asia, it's exactly the opposite. It's a very abysmal record. There's no progress and there's no real commitment right now to take serious steps against the traffic. Why? Well, I think there's sort of been three levels of U.S. complicity.

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The first is allying with corrupt local governments, corrupt local political factions or -- guerrilla and paramilitary leaders, up in the hills of the Golden Triangle region.

LEONARD: Where is that? The Golden Triangle.

MC COY: Burma, Thailand, and Laos. It's the northernmost hill areas of each of these three countries.

Then the next level is that whenever there are allegations concerning the involvement of our local allies in southeast Asia, whether it be the Thieu administration in South Vietnam, whether it be the royal Laotian government, whether it be leaders of the Thai government, or whether it be CIA mercenaries in Laos, the State Department usually has come forward with very very vehement denials and they're usually inaccurate denials.

And then, finally, the third level of this involvement is actual, overt involvement in the traffic, that is to say, in northern Laos, Air America, which is the CIA's charter airline has actually been involved in carrying opium and heroin on a regular basis for tribal mercenaries.

Now, in each case, what it's been, the reason for this involvement, general level has been that the United States has formed these alliances with these groups in order to fight local communist, whether it be communist political parties, whether it be communist revolutionary movement. And it's usually felt that ...

LEONARD: But where do the drugs -- what is the importance of this heroin?

MC COY: Okay, let's say you take somebody like, all right, take the most extreme case where Air America, the CIA's charter airline has been carrying the opium, okay?

All right, the CIA, in the early 1960's formed a mercenary army of thirty thousand Mayo hill tribesmen in northern Laos. Now the major cash crop for this tribe is opium. So that the CIA was mobilizing this tribe to fight a war and it was mobilizing total resources of this tribe. It was taking boys and men. It was using everything that this tribe had to offer to fight the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese who were moving through Laos on their way to South Vietnam down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

LEONARD: So where did the opium go?

MC COY: So the problem was that the tribe needed transport, logistics, for its opium crop, in order for the tribe to be prosperous, in order for it to continue to prosper while it was working for the CIA it needed transport for the opium, so the CIA had the only available means of transport, aircraft and it carried the opium.

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LEONARD: I think you're missing the point that I'm trying to get at which may or may not be that important, but if the CIA is doing this, as you indicate, and supposing they feel that this one group is going to be selling these drugs to another group that we don't like, i.e., communists in some other area. I could understand them wanting to encourage that. But where did they - where does this particular opium that you're talking about, now, go?

MC COY: Well, it was being grown by Mayo tribesmen in northern Laos. It was being flown out of the hills by Air America to regional trafficking and processing centers, cities that were in sort of central Laos. Okay?

LEONARD: Yeah.

MC COY: And then from there it was being sold to either organized crime, indigenous organized crime groups, members of the South Vietnamese military, members of the Laotian military and it was finding its way into South Vietnam where it was being used by the Vietnamese or Chinese addicts or by U.S. GIs.

In other words, you had a very clearcut case where Air America was flying opium that was being grown by its tribal mercenaries out of the hills to processing centers which were being run by the commander of its own, clandestine ...

LEONARD: With the very good possibility that it wound up in American hands in South Vietnam.

MC COY: Not a very good possibility. A very definite possibility. That it wound up in American hands in South Vietnam.

LEONARD: Well, now, how did they react when you confronted them with this information? You said you talked to a lot of guys in the CIA? How did they feel about that?

MC COY: Okay, for example, I had a chance to interview a CIA agent who's been stationed in northwest Laos and, for example, in 1965, back in the beginnings of the traffic, the beginnings of the development of processing, the beginnings of laboratories which are now processing heroin there, he had his clandestine base in a valley tucked away in northwestern Laos where he was training hill tribesmen to be sent into southern China to collect intelligence.

And at one point, his local mercenary commander set up a heroin laboratory across the stream from this clandestine base. And he decided to move his clandestine base out of the area, because the opium caravans coming in, the merchants coming in would compromise the security of his clandestine base. In other

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words, it didn't even enter his mind that he should do something about an opium refinery, you see, it wasn't his job. His job was to work with this man, the local CIA mercenary commander who was running the heroin laboratory and get him to fight the communists and to execute certain kinds of political and military tasks. It was not to get him out of the drug traffic. And he just turned a blind eye to it.

LEONARD: Now, how does the heroin get from southeast Asia, if it does, to the United States? Getting it from Laos to Cambodia to South Vietnam, one thing or another, I think is reasonably easy to understand, because there are both above and below public knowledge military operations going on. There's a lot of movement, there are people who are double agents, triple agents, who knows what over there. But how do they get from there to here? That's a long way off. We're still halfway around the world and you're indicating that some of this actual heroin that we're talking about from southeast Asia is right now being shot up on the streets of New York.

MC COY: NBC News, for example, based on its own interviews with government narcotics officials estimated that thirty percent of our heroin supply now comes from southeast Asia. It's my own feeling that since the late 1960s, that organized crime has been making a transition from Europe where the United States' diplomatic efforts have been enormously successful in curbing the drug traffic to southeast Asia where they have been enormously unsuccessful in dealing with the drug traffic.

Now the question, is, of course, what's the connection between southeast Asia and the United States? And it's (UNCLEAR) ... connection. Anybody that's seen THE FRENCH CONNECTION, anybody that knows anything about narcotics traffic realizes that in Europe, and particularly in Marseille, the traffic is run by Corsicans. What most people don't realize is that much of the traffic in IndoChina, the heroin traffic in IndoChina is also run by Corsican ... who have been operating out there for a quarter of a century.

LEONARD: Particularly, when there was - the French were involved there.

MC COY: IndoChina was a French colony; the Corsicans ran -- for example, the French military then was involved with -- the French military agencies ran the narcotics traffic in the late 1940s and early 1950s in IndoChina as a way of financing its clandestine operations. And the French Air Force was flying opium out of the hills, down to Saigon, it was being sold to Corsican syndicates based in Saigon, it was being put on French freighters which usually have Corsican crews and then being shipped to Marseille where it was being processed into heroin and then coming into this country.

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So that that route is a very well established route, you know, from the Golden Triangle to Saigon, then French freighters to Marseille, and then into this country, that's one route.

Another route is from out of the Golden Triangle region to Bangkok and then by ship to Hong Kong where the morphine is processed into heroin and then is smuggled into this country by Chinese seamen by Filipino diplomats, by couriers, an infinite variety.

In 1970, for example, the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics broke up a courier ring that was moving Hong Kong heroin to this country and it estimated that in the preceding twelve months, that courier ring had brought in something on the order of twenty percent of the U.S. total consumption, a thousand kilos of heroin had come from Hong Kong...

LEONARD: ... on a positive, more positive note, you have a chapter in your book entitled, What Can Be Done?

And simply, what can be done?

MC COY: Well .. as I can see it, there's sort of three general avenues of approach to dealing with the drug problem.

First, is curing the addict, dealing with the problem on the street.

Second, is going after organized crime.

And third, is stopping at the source, cutting it off before it gets out of the Golden Triangle region, before it gets out of southeast Asia.

And it's my own feeling that dealing with the addict problem is enormously complex and really is not very rewarding. As soon as you cure an addict, just more, addicts seem to be coming faster and faster, and we aren't even able to deal with the ones we have now.

As far as going after organized crime there, we've been cracking down on organized crime in this country for fifty years, now, ...

LEONARD: With very little effect.

MC COY: Very little effect. So -- and broad, organized crime is very very strong; the Corsican syndicates in southeast Asia are entrenched; the Chinese syndicates are entrenched. There seems to be no chance of going after them. So what I would say, it really has to be cleaned up at the source. And that's one path the Nixon Administration, the government's been pursuing

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with a good deal of success in the middle east. But they haven't been pursuing it in southeast Asia, simply because of the fact we're not free to bring full pressure, full diplomatic and political pressure against our allies in southeast Asia.

And the reason is very simple, is that, now take the case of Thailand, Thailand is very important for international narcotics traffic in southeast Asia. It's a major transit route.

LEONARD: So you're saying we have to absorb a certain amount of heroin from Thailand if we want to keep our diplomatic relationship with them on an even keel. I mean, is that basically what you're saying?

MC COY: Right. Right. When I was down in Washington in June, I interviewed State Department officials and I asked them point blank, I said, look ... they told me that they felt that our narcotics effort in Thailand was not going as well as it might. We were not getting good cooperation. I said, why? And they said, well, quite frankly, we're pulling our air squadrons, our bombing squadrons out of Vietnam, we're opening new bases in Thailand, we're using all of our diplomatic and political leverage to get these bases open, to preserve good relations with the Thai government. And if people like you start badmouthing the Thai government (OVERTALK) ... and if we start applying serious pressure, that's going to complicate our negotiations over military bases. As long as the war's going on and we really aren't free to deal with the drug traffic in Thailand.

LEONARD: Alfred McCoy's book is called THE POLITICS OF HEROIN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, and what we talked about today was really just beginning to touch on the surface of it, and I think, what you've hit on in this last moment, Alfred, is something that so many people have said so often and we rarely get a chance to explore it in any depth; we did it backwards today. People blame a lot of problems we're having in this country on the war. And perhaps part of the drug problem can directly be blamed on the war as you indicate, and I guess it's another reason why there are people who feel so definitely that this war must end if we can start to solve our own problems here at home.

I would like to thank you for being here with us. I hope I didn't put any words in your mouth just now.

MC COY: No.

LEONARD: Oh. Okay.